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ABSTRACT

A study examined how 8 writers, both successful and less successful (4 of each), constructed their interpretations of teachers' written comments and what factors influenced their readings of teachers' comments. Subjects, 8 students enrolled in the first semester writing course at Olivet Nazarene University, a small private liberal arts institution, were selected based on Advanced College Test (ACT) English scores (above 25 and below 13), an initial writing sample, and recommendations of 2 participating professors. Among the results indicated were: (1) that 76% of both groups of students interpreted the written comments as the teacher intended; (2) that rhetorical jargon was confusing to the successful writers; (3) that when students read teachers' comments, they were more concerned about meeting the teachers' agenda than communicating for their own purposes; (4) an influence that affected students' responses to teachers' comments was conflicting ideologies; and (5) students' end products did not necessarily represent what they had learned about writing. Findings suggest that dialogue through written response is still an ideal to be realized. (Contains 14 references.) (CR)

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Teachers' Written Comments and Students' Responses: A Socially Constructed Interaction

Paper presented at the 1997 4C's Convention

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When Steve, a first-year college student, read the marginal comment his teacher had written, he interpreted it one way whereas his teacher intended something else. Steve had discussed the role of computers in the classroom and concluded his essay saying, "Computers are an excellent teaching tool, but they are not excellent teachers." His teacher, who wanted to praise his writing style wrote, "Absolutely a beautiful sentence!" But the message Steve received was that his teacher was pleased because he had complimented teachers.

We smile at Steve's misunderstanding but realize that this incident is representative of many. Some research, in fact, suggests that written comments often confuse students and produce negative attitudes toward writing (Applebee, 1986; Hillocks, 1986; Sommers, 1982). Other studies like those of Freedman (1987) and Ziv (1984), argue that written response has some qualified merit. When teachers comment on papers, they endeavor to help writers consider the voice of readers. Freedman (1987) suggests that response serves as a scaffold to help writers solve the problem of meeting an audience's needs. Based on this pedagogy, we would expect students to value comments. Often, however, students look at written comments and complain that they just didn't know "what the teacher wanted." Such remarks are unsettling because they tacitly call into question the social and political relationship that exists when teachers comment on student papers, and they make us wonder what is happening in this intersection. Because written response is a social act, as Nystrand (1989) contends, it is important to understand how students who make up our writing classes interpret and appropriate teacher comments in this social context.

Method

The study I conducted in the fall of 1994 examined how eight writers, both successful and less successful, enrolled in the first semester writing course at Olivet Nazarene University, a small, private liberal arts institution, constructed their interpretations of teachers' written comments. The successful and less successful writers were defined in this case according to these criteria: Advanced College Test (ACT) English scores (above 25 and below 10 respectively), an initial writing sample, and recommendations of two participating professors. Four successful and four less successful writers were selected based on the above criteria. The study posed the broad question, "How do writers construct meaning and appropriate teachers' comments for themselves?" This paper focuses on these particular questions:

How do successful and less successful writers interpret teacher's written comments?

What factors influence their readings of teachers' comments?

Discussion

Rhetorical Barriers

One discovery of the study was that both groups of students interpreted 76% or more of the written comments as the teacher intended. This statistic could be interpreted two ways: first, three-fourths of the comments communicated as intended. This result seems relatively high in light of the literature that finds written response ineffective (Hillocks, 1986; Janello, 1985). On the other hand, there was almost one fourth of the comments that students either

did not understand or misunderstood, suggesting that the teachers' pedagogical intentions were not realized. The failed comments had similar characteristics. Both groups had difficulty understanding comments that used specialized language or jargon than those questioning content or praising their efforts. Comments such as "faulty parallelism", "tone" or "tr" for transition were misunderstood. Less successful writers, for example, all received a specific comment critiquing their thesis statements on a comparison paper, "Thesis needs two subjects + special interest and evaluation." No one understood this comment even though the instructor had explicitly taught the "formula" in class to help students develop their thesis ideas for the paper. They recalled the class discussion but had no idea what the formula really meant; in fact, one student, Thomas, overgeneralized the comment and concluded that every thesis statement from this point on should have "two subjects" and some sort of "evaluation."

Rhetorical jargon was also confusing to successful writers. In one case, the teacher had written, "you may want to soften tone" in response to the writer's statement, "They [public schools] are now teaching not only 'reading, writing, and rithmetic' but also sex education, meditation, and other things that need not be taught in schools." Whereas the teacher intended for the writer to be less dogmatic about what should or should not be taught in schools, Janna did not understand this comment. Only as she discussed the comment with the researcher did she realize the intent of the word tone, that perhaps she was being too harsh on public schools by stating emphatically what should not be taught. Comments like this couched in rhetorical language created a barrier to instruction and reinforced a gatekeeper role instead of reader role. These findings affirm earlier studies of Butler (1980), Hillocks

(1986), and Ziv (1984).

This study also revealed that when student writers read teachers' comments, they were more concerned about meeting the teacher's agenda than communicating for their own purposes. During the interviews, students said that they would change their texts in response to the comments if given the opportunity for a better grade or if the teacher instructed them to rewrite. Students had already read their drafts with peers and revised them twice before the teacher evaluated them and wrote their comments. Nevertheless, student writers responded that they would change their text even when they did not understand the teacher's comment. For example, the less successful writers all said they would change their thesis statements in response to the confusing comment about "need two subjects +special interest + evaluation." Even though they admitted that they did not know what to revise, they said they would change their thesis in some way. This discovery reinforces the idea that school-based writing is teacher driven, no matter how it is packaged. Even though the students had shared their writing with multiple audiences-peers, other friends, and their instructor, they were keenly aware that the teacher was the audience that counted. Jason, a less successful writer, said it this way: "Did the teacher tell me to revise it? Because if the teacher would, I would think that she knows what she is talking about, so I would revise all these."

Why were students in both groups willing to accommodate their teachers' suggestions? One reason was possibly the novice-expert role that characterized the student-teacher relationship. Students expected their instructors to know more than they about writing, so they accepted or even welcomed their changes. Less successful writers like Marie expressed frustration in trying to edit: "When you put everything together, with grammatics [her word]

and everything that comes into it, my writing is a disappointment to me." Marie looked to her instructor as editor-in-chief.

Even the successful writers considered their instructor an expert. Lisa's teacher, for instance, wrote "not parallel" over this sentence: "Things such as a new building, smaller classes, more teachers are on an agenda somewhere." Lisa could not find the error even though she understood the concept of parallelism and carefully reread each phrase in the series to check the grammatical structure; however, it never occurred to Lisa to question the teacher's comment. And the problem in this case was not so much faulty parallelism as that of emphasis and the omission of the conjunction and. Students in this study demonstrated the attitude that the teacher is the expert and they are apprentices. They considered themselves "unskilled" particularly when participating in rhetorical discourse. Students were aware that their teachers belonged to a discourse community that they were supposed to imitate (Beach, 1993), but they did not necessarily know why their attempts fell short; consequently, they took a passive stance acquiescing to the "disciplinary authority," as Ball, Dice & Bartholomae (1990) contend.

Teacher and Student: Conflicting Ideologies

Another influence that affected students responses to teachers' comments was conflicting ideologies. When the teacher's ideologies opposed the beliefs of student writers, the students allowed their teacher's world views to shape their writing. In one case with Janna, she recognized that her instructor did not share her conservative view about the merits of home schooling, so she modified her position at the suggestion of her teacher to "soften

her tone." In the interview, she admitted that her own opinion of homeschooling had not changed even though her stance in the paper had. In another instance, Lisa was frustrated that her traditional view of women clashed with her instructor's feminist perspective; she concluded that it would be impossible to write successfully about her opposing view. She said, "We had one guy in my class that got an A on his paper, and he wrote something she doesn't agree with....I didn't see that paper but it must have been wonderful." It was evident that the teacher's ideology influenced what these students said in their papers. They were keenly aware of the uneven power relationship that exists in the classroom.

The other side of this finding indicates that the student writers were often unaware of other voices and wrote from the monologic perspective that Beach (1993) describes. Lisa, for example, began one paper about the role of women in the home. But after reading her teacher's comments on an early draft, she revised the paper changing her emphasis to any "caregiver" rather than women. Lisa spent many hours revising to make her paper more acceptable to the wider audience, but was disappointed with the final paper. Why? Her final paper hedged. Her instructor wrote, "I still think some people will put up defenses...that center on your call for women only to refocus--even if you redeem yourself later." In an interview, Lisa expressed her frustration: "I really was having trouble with saying people and men and women cause I really think that it is the woman's job." Later she added, "This paper was quite hard for me to write because I couldn't write exactly what I wanted to say." In an attempt to meliorate her conservative position, she gave up her voice to construct what Brannon and Knoblauch (1984) refer to as the teacher's "ideal" text. Yet, it could also be argued that as Lisa attempted to model a dialogic perspective, she was still positioned in a

monologic stance, creating unresolved conflict in her final text (see Beach, 1993).

Another student, Mark, also had difficulty in developing dialogue with his audience and, in particular, his teacher. Mark, who came from a traditional, two-parent home, had framed his argument condemning divorce in an analogy about the mating habits of "dogs" and "eagles." He had written that people should stop living like "dogs," who have multiple sex partners, and start living like "eagles," who have life-long mates. His instructor had challenged his intolerant tone. When Mark read her comments, he wavered between his position and his teacher's:

> I don't know...I thought it was a good comparison the way our society is today, whether it is offensive or not. And I thought it would be just offensive enough to make people want to change without turning people away from my paper. But then again, you always have that risk when you try to be strong with something like that.

Although Mark concluded that he should leave out the dog analogy to please his audience, he still maintained that his analogy was persuasive: He writes, "What the eagles [part] is saying to me is a noble thing."

These examples, in particular, point out that writing is value-laden, whether it is the students' writing, teachers' responses, or the point of intersection. And in this intersection, when readers construct meaning, they do so with their hearts as well as their minds. Certainly, it could be argued that the writing teacher's role is to help students question their uncontested assumptions and develop a dialogic perspective if they are to engage in dialogue (see Beach, 1993). But can this role be realized in the classroom where the teacher's voice dominates either explicitly or implicitly? Along this line, Greenhalgh (1992) cautions

teachers that their "interruptive" voice, or reader response role, can silence the student's voice. From the data here, we would add that their interruptive voice may disguise the student's voice. Teachers, consequently, must recognize that an imbalance of power exists in the classroom (Brannon & Knoblauch, 1982) and act responsibly, whether they lean to the political left or right.

End Products: Nonrepresentative of Learning

Another finding of this study was that students' end products did not necessarily represent what they had learned about writing. In reading their teachers' suggestions, students often anticipated the teacher's response. They realized that their papers were imperfect products. Although all the students engaged in the writing processes in planning, drafting and revising, often looping back, there were outside influences, many social in nature, that interrupted their processes. For example, several students handed in final products that they knew needed further revision for clarity or more planning for ideas. This was true for Jason when he recognized that his final paper deviated from the topic but chose not to take the time to change it. It was true for Sherry when she changed topics in the middle of a paragraph because she did not know enough about the subject. She remarked, "I had nothing more to say." But instead of exploring her topic for more substantial information, she said, "I just added stuff." Why? Academic writing was just not a high priority for Sherry; she was satisfied to earn D's.

In another instance, Steve expected his teacher to comment on his lack of transitions. He analyzed his own text as "choppy" but chose not to revise because of other priorities. As

Steve remarked, "This paper was already written but my Spanish paper wasn't." And Thomas, who knew that his conclusion was weak, was not surprised by his teacher's comment. After several attempts at drafting his conclusion, he was simply too frustrated to revise: "I have other classes; I cannot spend all my time on this class." In Thomas' case, although he recognized his weakness, he did not know how to change it. Instead of seeking help, he decided to settle for a less-than-satisfactory conclusion. When these students chose not to re-enter their texts, they did so based on other influences such as time management, academic motivation, and/or personal priorities. They had knowledge about good writing but, for various reasons, opted for a less-than-ideal text.

The fact that students' end products did not represent what they knew about school-based writing has implications for writing instruction. When teachers use written comments to instruct students, they often evaluate strengths and weaknesses according to the student's product in hand, but such assumptions are often erroneous as in the cases above. Students may internalize more knowledge about writing conventions than their drafts evidence. If this is the case, teachers' comments to "develop detail," or "work on conclusions," or "see handbook for transitions" may not be suited to the students' actual needs. A student may well recognize the problem but lack the ability or motivation to solve the problem. Consequently, writing teachers need to seek a richer picture of their students' knowledge about writing than products alone provide. In this respect, students' self-analyses or self-evaluations become important tools for setting instructional goals in writing.

To enlarge our understanding of the development of writers, writing instruction must also focus less on the end product as symbol for improvement and more on the final product

as representative of multiple texts, texts along a continuum of the "text-I-intended-to write" to "text-I-had-hoped-to-write" as Beach (1993) suggests. Onore (1984), who speaks to this challenge, found that growth in writing did not necessarily result in improved text. In fact, the student in her study who stretched to explore her text in meaningful ways produced an inferior final product. Onore (1984) concludes:

> We must value the growth of writers as well as the growth of their writing and redefine improvement in writing so that this construct is compatible with a more complex picture of developing competencies. (p. 18)

I would extend her argument to consider those social influences that also add to this picture and may interfere with improved quality of texts.

Conclusion

The findings presented here inform us of social and political influences that shape students' responses to teachers' written comments. They call into question ideological conflicts in the classroom and ideal texts as measures of writing improvement. And they expose the conflicting roles that teachers play when commenting on students' papers--that in particular of expert, authority, and reader. In light of the literature that encourages negotiated boundaries in the domain of student-teacher reponse, this study suggests that dialogue through written response is still an ideal to be realized. Perhaps as educators, we should listen more acutely to those disturbing voices when students remark, "What is it that you want?".

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